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### "No Sexual Intercourse Aloud"

It's a curious guilt, this being amused while knowing better.

At first, I was part of the humoring process, concurred at least. I'll back up. For two or so hours a day I sit in a sunny alcove at a magnificent state library, all marble and aromatic oak, and full of musty, pleasant tradition (the library that is). There I commit research, the subject of which is interesting only to some one hundred experts, so-called, in the world. We meet sometimes and, as human nature would have it, develop solemn friendships and dark hatreds over immense trivialities--usually in some sin-bucket city where we manage to look bemused while terrified. New Orleans was the last place for this hyper-stressed voyeurism.

At any rate the particular citizen I laughed at in our coolly moral library was meticulous, richly dressed, aglow in health, and unable to put the simplest thought directly.

A typical verbal dance of his, and there were many...well, let him wend his torturous way as he speaks to the chief librarian, a man of some presence, not to say girth. "I need, uh, when a person who has the knowledge and facilities, uh? Is...asked?"

"That would be help, information. Why I'm here." The chief librarian is a florid fellow and one, not surprisingly, of great appetite, who often was eating something or enjoying the memory of it--in any case he had looked the latter way that particular afternoon just before the approach by the fidgety, inarticulate one.

And there they remain in memory, surrounded by rosy marble and comprising what the TV boys call a two-shot. But I should stick to the subject: "Of course. Where's my...uh, mind?"--he asks our librarian while fairly tapdancing along the marble floor, black shoes flashing. (Well I don't have it, thank the Lord! I think, seesawing on my own feet in front of the card index.) "Anyway, the one fellow... and the other?" he dances on, "Instrument involved. He. The first. Wooden. Though they're metal, uh, aluminum now...some. Not relevant to my...?"

Finally standing still, he begins sweating, his profile a blue shimmer against the rosy marble. "Your question?" smiles the chief librarian, hands on ample hips, and lifting an eyebrow at me as if we two formed a compact of mild toleration against this vague and silly man. It's an idea I don't like--didn't like then. A good person, one with courage, will let no one assume he is uncritically going along.

"But not at all levels," this uncertain man plods. "The highest...forbidden. Aluminum, that is."

"Uh huh," nods the benign librarian, seeming to increase in girth in his rootedness as this flibbity-gidget again begins circling through the dusty slants of sunlight, firing his asinine comments and questions from all angles. Aluminum indeed! Well, getting the actual question from him was as likely as digging bauxite from out of that marble floor and smelting it on the spot.

"I see..." ponders the librarian, his British tweeds deepening in afternoon light--perhaps his beginning to "see" in the midst of the other's verbal and physical dance being a mellow function of his few luncheon Heinikins rather than patient erudition.

Still the doltish wanderer hasn't found his precise ground: "After the striking of one, why then another, uh, of an

opposite, uh, faction, has the obligation to to to to to..?"

"To catch...a ball! It's baseball!" the fat librarian affirms.

I'll spare you the five, scraping minutes, with the minor librarians, female all, going in and out of the stacks while shaking their gray heads, until their hearty chief extracts the final question: the career fielding average compiled by Babe Ruth.

Hallelleulah--a rare something the fat and florid librarian didn't know outright. He told the dancing bumbler to look in The Baseball Fact Book. Of course.

The other performance I remember most, of a rainy, swirling afternoon when autumn leaves plastered the windows:

"Structure... people living in...he'd been Princeton president too...but but but a side...kick, SIDEKICK!...political... IMPORTANT!" he finally blurted--well most of his utterances could be classified as blurts but this was, in the words of archival TV's Ed Sullllivan, a really big one. "Rank! Army!"

At any rate the question (?) eventually proved to be in reference to Colonel House, paramount advisor to Woodrow Wilson. I'll bet you came close to guessing that. (Strange such a game can prove addictive. Way of showing off? How smart we are in decoding confusions? I suppose, but what do I know?)

"Well...we got there! Goodness!"--the first time I had heard the chief display any impatience, but for some reason strange young people had begun hiving around, dressed in the latest fashions of sexuality and rankly wet from the rain.

At that time, I still held the memory of his knowing glance at me during the Babe Ruth episode, and felt my guilt both renewed and amplified, for I sincerely desired the approval of this large, gregarious man ever since I had witnessed the impromptu party at the Ole New England Inne (actually an Italian restaurant, mostly). As I shaved a hunk of Vermont cheddar and sipped white zinfandel at the bar, he bestowed small gifts brought back from England after his yearly trip to buy clothes. To be truthful, I profoundly envied the warmth the waitresses and the bartender revealed towards him. Never, unfortunately, one of the boys, I nonetheless shared the raucousness at the immense vulgarity of a blowup rubber woman he fetched from his sportscar at the last, and which held a tray for drinks atop giant breasts. This prize went to Shorty the delivery boy, a man of sixty. I laughed, as the expression goes, until I cried.

But then wondered at my tears, as construction equipment gouged and roared nearby and my white wine vibrated in the glass, wondered what more there was to them. A loneliness wider and deeper than I had suspected. It had to be faced, of course.

As you can see I know no reason to spare myself: in the pursuit of degrees and minor honors, I should have become a better human being. No excuses.

At any rate I often marveled as to how he could be so educated and cultured and yet so daringly vulgar? And so warmly open! I had observed him many times around the restaurant, huggy-kissy around the women, and like a ruddy locker room comrade around the men who, at least the ones rougher-edged, called him all sorts of whoremongers and faggots. (The restaurant attracted a wide clientele.) Anyway, the whole Italian-Colonial place brightened when he set a chubby foot inside, in his English shoes, of course.

And yet he remained a learned and cultured colleague in the sacrosanct confines of our library. Truly A Man For All Seasons. I am a stick, as I said, inward, shy nerd who, given the chance, is liable to say the wrong thing in mixed company, or the right thing at the wrong time. Or to say nothing when all look to me.

Or, even worse yet, most often attempt to say nothing somewhat eloquently. Oh well. You know me I dare say. My name is legion, that lame legion of the perpetually half-fearful.

I therefore could never be like my librarian in the scene I often picture: large red-checked napkin tied round his neck to

shield his tweeds from the lasagna and from the oversized goblet of ferocious Cianti he gestures with, laughing with everyone. A little wine flings off the rim and hangs in vibrant air. (For some reason, too, those red drops reappear to me from time to time, by themselves, abstracted from the convivial scene.)

But...I'm happy enough. What life offers most of, I have had. Now much of it is over, with my wife ill. It comes to us all at some point, the hand impossible to play.

Anyway, the librarian had a perfectly lovely life, taking as it did from scholarship and epicureanism and warm friends.

Okay, you ask, when will you trot on the dark cloud?

In a shipment of television tapes. As far as I knew, not a modern electron ran about any instrument in the marble library--old books and yellow index cards, and banker's lamps radiating dust down from cracked green shades. (Even the phones were those black prewar thumpers which could withstand a direct bomb hit.)

Therefore had you popped in a few weeks ago after fifty years absence, you'd be pretty comfortable in the fact that nothing had changed, inhaling, ah, that venerable oaken fragrance. (But don't we need some such place in the fury and slash of our quick world?)

"There's a mistake." My heroic librarian kept smiling at

the wiry trucker who was methodically piling the boxes of television tapes between them on the floor.

"Nope. And I leave it all here whether you sign or not. It aint no skin off my nose. I do what they say. It's easier like that, believe me."

The shame of it, and that's exactly the right word, is that this driver would never bring his son here, which I as small-d democrat lament--and yet the place is a treasurehouse for all the world, let alone this city. I guess I'd have to fault the chief librarian's pr there. Oh there had been the occasional grammar school group herded in, but every citizen could have found something of value--even latent criminals anent the exhaustive law holdings.

At any rate, if you're excluded from something, or feel you are--the same thing, no?--it's virtually the same as being a criminal anyway. But there I go being hyper-critical again--trump card of the impotent.

The cartons stayed unopened while he tried to get the library board to remove them, visiting each member at his and her place of business. But, no go, since the governor himself had decided.

It seems that the silvery-sleaze media center of the capital had burned down--fast. (It had been named The Grafton



Reece Center and was popularly known as Graft n' Grease). At any rate something called the MY MOTHER THE CAR FESTIVAL was rescheduled, instead, at our holy library! I felt the entire project had been conceived as a joke since I vaguely remembered the TV show as a weak one, but intense young careerists with bottle-bottom glasses had mobilized behind it. And they found little that was funny.

My last gastronomical view of the librarian was his snapping something to his favorite waitress, whom he called Beatrice, as to the quality of his veal parmigian: "Metallic cheese!" he sneered--so unlike him. Yet...he was right. The standards at our favorite restaurant were slipping, as soggy crackers in front of me on the bar testified.

Around this time, too, Cross Punks appeared with their hair, their walkmans and loose muscles. As you know--and know--from tabloid television, the boys dress as girls and vice versa--as if anyone could tell. I believe they did all of the setting up of the VCRS that the state, in the person of a demanding young woman, had delivered in a jumble of machines and cables.

The grayheaded librarians would have nothing to do with her--technology and those connected to it smacking of sin.

Presumably the Cross Punks checked out the tapes from the

old show and watched them--such activity comprising the "festival"-- actually they watched the pornographic ones they had carried in.

I had no trouble with their playing with sexuality. (After all, we had already gotten better acquainted in recent nights, my watching them on latenight talk shows after my wife had lapsed into fitful sleep.) Kids...that's all. They'd assume the role society expected of them sooner or later. Right now they could flaunt their hatred for the uptight rest of us. To tell the truth, the violence associated with their "movement" bothered me more. It always does, but it's always manifesting itself, and in all eras. In Sam Johnson's London, as an example, delinquents calling themselves Mohawks would thump the bejesus out of any stragglers between taverns.

The chief librarian had done his best to give some class to the My Mother the Car Festival, flanking the circulation desk with posters executed by a leading Japanese graphic artist, and showing a ghostly black-and-white collage of mothers of all races, along with foreground autos, mostly Ferraris of a walloping red. The kids giggled at the posters the same way they giggled at the confused questioner when he went into one of his vague dances. As a matter of fact, it was they who witnessed the one concerning Woodrow Wilson's Colonel House

their very first day on board.

Oh well--fools of the old and new orders.

The vague man took to lodging in an empty alcove and muttering out the window at construction materials being unloaded across the narrow street. I joined him to see where a hole in the ground attested to the departure of THE INSTITUTE FOR THE NEW...whatever. Only a portion of the old sign stuck up from the dumpster. When they uncrated a greenish gold statue of Delilah cutting Samson's hair, I deduced we were in for another S & D Healthclub. My great leap forward in reasoning was followed by the huffing up of the chief librarian and the whole tribe of acned crossdressers carrying VCRS and monitors. "They have to come in here!" he all but screamed. We didn't inquire as to why, hearing the sobs of an assistant librarian retching out somewhere in the middle bowels of the building.

We settled ourselves at a desk across from the kids and they ran a tape which popped up on the largest monitor. It showed what I took to be a French sailor. He wore a top of horizontal red stripes and bell bottom pants, and everything about him was sunken, his chest, the hollows of his cheeks and eyes. Was he ill, addict, what? Then a Brunhilde rushed in and tore down the velcro front of those trousers and, of course, the extraordinary sprung forth, explaining the spavined look: all

the energy had drained down into the thing.

IT MADE HIM AN INTERNATIONAL STAR! crowed the whiskey voice of former blond leading man Ty Merrick. Thousands went in the training of that voice, ravaged but still resonant even in that marble with its horrible acoustics where you couldn't hear the person beside you at times--a fortunate case now, since my vague desk partner launched into a Panglossian movie review, decrying the poor lighting would you believe? Ty's voice kept repeating as did the whole fantastic vignette--the kids had spliced the business into a loop. (Shouldn't our own stupid acts be depicted thus?--the repetition'd help us truly see ourselves.)

Suddenly all the construction guys across the street shrieked and cheered at once, somehow catching a ghost image reflected back off the glass of a dusty print of Robert Fulton's steamboat on the wall above our heads.

The kids turned the monitor around for them while putting hands into each other's blouses and pants for our benefit, one young person staring and staring at me. The only look I've ever seen absolutely empty of emotion. Blank is too woefully inadequate an adjective. The construction boys continued leaping up and down like loose electrons and I began encountering a monster headache.

This is when I, shy as I am, complained, and the entire

"festival" was again moved, this time to the basement, and therefore I and the other resident bookworms didn't have to bear the ambivalent young anymore, nor hear the cheers of the construction workers.

We didn't miss either; we worked on, our own small nonsense a barricade against the world, I suppose.

Meanwhile the staff lurched into a public relations mode. This policy was instituted one bright afternoon by the chief librarian upon the advice of a local politician who promised to intercede with the governor--insinuating that the librarian could perhaps do something for him someday. He also advised him there'd be more clout if the library became more visible, and that he'd therefore have to train his staff to greet the bound-to-widen public with some warmth.

My first intimation of profound change was a circle of the gray librarians surrounding what looked like a huge, florescent lime. This latter proved to be the sartorial version of the politician's advice in the person of the chief librarian in a green leisure suit which looked like it had been cut with a machete. His pep talk lifted the other librarians off reserve and they positively radiated towards any request, later that afternoon hedging in the vague man who more brightly danced in their collective regard. His subject...well they never found

out since smoke flew up the semi-circular stairwells, packing the angled sunbeams, and we all observed the chief streak greenly past.

Upon return he burst "Practically a marijuana bonfire down there! But that's not the worst of it. Oh no!" Spastically fetching a piece of poster board and a black magic marker from beneath the main circulation desk, he made a sign reading

NO SEXUAL INTERCOURSE ALOUD

When he was taping it up over one of the now-straggly My Mother the Car posters, I had to approach him. I knew he meant allowed and not aloud, and puzzled how such a literate man, however distraught, could make this mistake. The worst thing was that try as I might I could not make him understand, and thus the sign remained. I did hastily persuade him--it was thank goodness closing time--to join me for a drink at our restaurant.

Which...was gone. We picked our way atop a steaming heap to a bulldozer parked with its nose up. A whipping banner attached to it boasted S & D WEST WILL SOON JOIN S & D EAST! "No one told me. Why would no one tell me?" he repeatedly asked, stumbling through the autumnal vapors of his own voice, the leisure suit taking on a bronze patina in the smoky light.

"A hellish circle this," I sighed, knowing his love for

Dante.

I stayed away from the library for a couple of days and then one late morning while I was serving my wife her herbal tea laced with a little cognac, in bounded my friend on her little TV. He still hadn't jettisoned the leisure suit which took on an unearthly green glow, or rather pulse, fitting the angry ambient of CONFRONT!.

Gary Withers, in that most damning of phrases a local broadcast celebrity, began by taunting him, "I understand you're trying to throw young people out of that fancy library of yours."

"We are open to all persons, all subjects, all research, all knowledge, but I don't have enough room for the material I--"

Gary Withers interrupted him. "So many shows from that whole dumb era and you choose Car Mother! Why not Peter Gunn? At least there'd be decent music!"

But my friend could not be turned from his sterling selling job "...happy to see many more people, every man woman and child of the community...the library is our collective pride. International reputation!" (What the appeal realized the following week was a trio of old maid retired schoolteachers, all blue hair and bounce: We didn't know this place exISTed!)

Gary Wither's other guest was a newly self-ordained "Activist of Disgust." "What you doin' down there, man? We gonna open it to the people! Go down there and piss on the floors. Wake you' ass up!"

I could feel the chief librarian's heart seizing under that stupid suit. "Can't say piss and ass over the airwaves," smirked Gary Withers.

In the only lucky break I can remember from this whole time, that following week a chartered bus took the activist's group to the wrong institution, and they made their odoriferous statement at The Transportation Hall of Fame.

In the ensuing weeks the vague man took to hiding in the stacks. I think it was because the youngsters had taken a perverse interest in him, often performing little comedic scenarios imitating him and the chief librarian--both of whom they depicted as surrealistically hyper and hopelessly confused.

The appearance of Buster Nevers, though, brought him out from the stacks. It all but overwhelmed me too. Buster, a few years past his retirement from the National Football League, established a massive presence in the lobby of the library, his own color and his beige Italian suit blending so magnificently with the rosy marble as to make the rest of us uncomfortable. But he too became quickly agitated when the vague man commenced



asking him his oddly slanted questions, beginning "He kicked it and caught it! Another sport. Not football--" and on and on...

"I don't have the least idea what you're saying! No clue, man!" Buster ultimately roared, and our old dithery friend turned on his heel and walked out the door forever, sucked into blinding, mercury noon.

"Welcome to Blitz Day!" announced Buster Nevers when he had gotten himself back together. The librarians huddled around, the chief still in the green leisure suit, alas much looser, the right breast featuring the sheen of tomato sauce that had probably come from a gobbled meatball sandwich after the television show.

Buster had a dual charge from the governor, to move kids and equipment to a new library opening in a shopping center, and to introduce a bar code system into the circulation process.

"Hello. How are you?" he observed the niceties several times as each kid departed, holding equipment under one arm and squeezing genitals with the other. "Now would your mother approve of that?" scolded Buster finally, which led to greater excesses and some hyperbolic grunts.

"Well thank God that's over," sighed Buster as the last girl (?) turned round darkly from the brilliant doorway to give us the finger. "If a kid of mine...!" and he slammed an

enormous fist into his looseleaf notebook. "But back to business..."

I couldn't help thinking that the knot of them resembled the scene when these same gray librarians surrounded the chief as he introduced his now-rusting green leisure suit to the literate public. But this time the confidence from the brown center of the group was fairly stinging the air: "Tomorrow we bring in the machines; today we learn three key words! That's all." I can't remember the words now, and they couldn't learn them then.

After a half hour, Buster turned to me as I pretended to browse through a drawer randomly extracted from the card index. "Am I a bad guy? Do I look like a bad guy to you?" I shook my head as the assembled librarians glazed. "Walls! I got walls here! Welllllll...we'll write it down!" He yanked a pencil from an inside pocket but it snapped in his hammy hand. All the librarians shrieked at once, bouncing echos about the marble lobby. "Whoa! I got another! Save the upsets for the big things. Please!" He handed another pencil to the oldest librarian, a lady as crushed and sunken as had been the French sailor, but with no latent potency of any kind.

He instructed her to write the number one on the reverse side of a Mother the Car poster, but she looked back with such

fright that he gently transferred the pencil to the chief librarian. "Sir! Don't let us down in this! Unnnnnnn-LESS it's some sort of joke? Did Lukey Maxwell out of the Cultural Affairs Office...?"

Our chief librarian held the pencil fiercely posed. "Well, never mind then. Do you suppose that you could make the number, the Roman numeral, one?" The chief librarian emitted a sort of high-pitched mewling sound and attacked the poster with the pencil but...I don't know quite how to say this...couldn't bring the point in contact with it in order to write, instead slapped the pencil sideways again and again, the flat of the instrument that is, against the cardboard. It sickened me, has since, and even as brusque as he was, Buster Nevers found tears in his eyes.

Chief turned to me, his face as loose as his green suit, and thrust the pencil towards his baggy throat. "Inside...press up! Up! Jam! Hard! Mur--murder! What?"

"You're angry. Hurt. It's been...too much." I softly took the pencil.

"Yeah?" shouted the alarmingly reassertive Buster Nevers. "Well it's all too much for me!"

As he stomped out I found the chief librarian practically in my armpit. "Crap TV," he began, "bar code shit...horror

kids!"

"Yes."

"Where friends? Restaurant? Why? Presents. England! England!"--his face ashen.

"That was grave. How they could sell out to developers with nary a word to you, I..."

"And scum politics, ugh!" he shuddered.

"Not a place for you or me. Not that we're pure--but relatively we certainly are! Naive for sure. We can't sense the greasy wheels within wheels--don't have a clue."

"My beautiful library and then then then smoking g-g-grass."

"Terrible."

"Fucking!" The other librarians left.

"I...don't know," I touched him. "You get comfortable and then the bills come in, and the dues must always be paid eventually. Anybody happy can't be left that way I suppose. Not for long anyway."

"Books?"

"Yes? Books?"

"No more," he sobbed, grabbing my arm, his eyes skidding beyond terror, the two of us fronting the ancient wooden cabinet. "No more books. There'll be no! Nowhere!"

His face went fish-belly white and seemed to be melting downward.

"Oh there'll be one or two left," I encouraged.